A FULL AND FAITHFUL LIFE
5. Hearing and Doing

April 10, 2011

Psalm 130
Philippians 2:5–11
Matthew 7:12, 24–29

“Do to others as you would have them do to you.”
Matthew 7:12 (NRSV)

A life of love is not easier than following the rules. Its demands have no limits, and it challenges us to imagination, to creative improvisation in thinking how to be most of service . . . secure in the knowledge that God already loves us.

William Placher
Jesus the Savior:
***The Meaning of Jesus Christ for Christian Faith*.**

Startle us, O God, with your truth. Silence in us any voice but your own, and in this time together, speak your word to us, that hearing we may believe, and believing trust you with our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Peter Gomes died recently. I loved his title: “The Plummer Professor of Christian Morals and Pusey Minister in the Memorial Church at Harvard University.” Appointed to that important post in 1970, Peter eloquently and faithfully represented the Christian faith to thousands of students and faculty at that important academic, political, and cultural hub. I was blessed by his friendship. He visited Fourth Church on several occasions and preached in our pulpit. He invited me to preach at Harvard twice and told his congregation about a big, marvelous church, in Chicago, that is actually filled with people on the Lord’s Day at 9:30 and then again at 11:00. Peter was urbane, extraordinarily bright, comfortable with university presidents and political leaders of both parties, and always kind. When the Harvard student body was roiled by a mean-spirited and homophobic article that was circulating around the campus, Peter showed up at a protest rally and announced that he was a Christian minister who happened also to be gay. It was a very courageous thing to do.

In his last book, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, he said, “I believe that there is a vast universe of people of good will and reasonable intelligence eager to give the Christian faith a chance to speak in their lives and in the world, who are not satisfied with the conventional wisdom, and who find things as they are simply not good enough” (p. 4).

Everyone seems to agree that, as a people, we are hungering for something, longing for meaning and purpose. Everyone agrees that our consumer culture, as comfortable and delightful as it can be for those of us who are privileged, is not, in fact, coming close to feeding our deepest hunger. What is it? What’s missing? We have been asking that question during this Lenten season, and I have suggested that what is missing is a full and faithful life as described by Jesus. At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus took his followers away from the crowds that had begun to gather wherever he went and spoke at length to them and gave them a clinic in discipleship. He taught them what it means to follow him, what followers of his do in the world, the practices that will define them as his men and women, Christians they would be called later. There is far more to the Sermon on the Mount, found in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 of the Gospel of Matthew, than we have covered, but we have looked at several major themes, or practices: praying, forgiving, not worrying, asking, searching, knocking. This morning, the conclusion and what some have said is the very essence of everything Jesus said and taught: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you”—the Golden Rule.

I don’t know about you, but I’m tired of being embarrassed by religion. The self-appointed leader of a tiny group of people in Florida, who call themselves a church, burns, in the name of Jesus, the holy book of one of the world’s great religions. In the name of that religion, and in the name of God, people halfway around the world, incited by one of their clergy, kill United Nations workers, civilians, and turn their hatred on American soldiers. Back in Florida, the self-appointed pastor, who is now a celebrity because of what his actions have inspired, solemnly tells ABC News that the deaths, and the deaths of American soldiers, are worth it because of the thousands of souls that will be saved in the future as a result of his actions.

Franklin Graham calls Islam a wicked and evil religion. Megachurch pastor Rod Parsley wants America to fulfill its divine destiny by declaring war on and destroying Islam.

And I want to say, Enough. Stop it. Stop trying to save souls and save the world; stop trying to save souls by attacking the very heart, the precious center, of who those people are; and start, please, trying to save the world God so loved as to send his Son into it.

Jesus, who we Christians believe shows us as much of what God is like as we can understand, consistently and persistently talked about a generous, merciful God. The way Matthew remembers him, Jesus told his followers that the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, are blessed by God; told them to love their enemies and pray for those who were persecuting them; told them not to retaliate and become part of the endless cycle of violence that has plagued the human race from the beginning of time, but to turn the other cheek; told them to forgive, to let go of resentment and hatred.

It was, and is, a generous ethic based on the conviction that God is generous, and gracious and merciful, that God loves every human being and therefore every human being deserves respect and to be treated with fairness and compassion.

“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you: for this is the law and the prophets.” This is the real deal. This is what I am about, what God is about.

We know it as the Golden Rule, and we know that it is not original with Jesus. In fact, it appears in many ancient cultures and religions—in Babylon, Egypt, Persia, and China. The label Golden Rule comes from Confucius, the sixth century before the Common Era: “Here certainly is the golden maxim: Do not do to the other that which we do not want them to do to us.” (The U.S. military understands the wisdom of that and knows the repercussions when our nation tortures its prisoners and argues that it is legal to do so.) The rule appears in Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, in Greek philosophy. It’s as old as the Code of Hammurabi, and it is in the Hebrew Bible. Mostly it is expressed negatively: “Don’t do to others what you do not wish them to do to you.”

And it is in Islam: “Hurt no one so that no one may hurt you”—the Koran —“None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself.”

Jesus no doubt knew about the negative form; he also surely knew the way his religion brought together love for God and love for neighbor. It was the heart of his teaching. In Jesus’ thinking, the two mandates—to love God with heart, mind, and strength and the neighbor as you love yourself — become one powerful, overarching, moral principal: love of God and love of neighbor; love of God by loving neighbor. Walter Brueggemann said it is as if Jesus created a new word: “Godneighbor.”

Notice how Jesus takes a negative, behavioral prohibition—“Do not do to your neighbor what you don’t want to happen to you”—and turns it into a positive: “Do to your neighbor what you want done to you.” Morality for Jesus is always more than refraining from doing immoral things; it is always

about doing, loving, serving, helping, feeding, clothing, sheltering. The ethic of Jesus is active, not passive. The way Matthew remembers Jesus, God's will always has to do with the well-being of the other, and the moral criteria by which we will be judged finally is not so much what we believed, but how we loved; not so much the orthodoxy of our personal creed, but how we have helped and served others.

Peter Gomes observed how difficult this all is for us. He observed that most of us have no trouble loving people who are agreeable to us. "To love God," he said, "is one thing, but what is it to love what God loves? This is not as easy as it seems, for God's love seems less discriminating than our own. . . . The notion that God could love things that we cannot love is a hard pill to swallow" (p. 80).

Peter, who was both African American and gay, knew personally about how exclusive Christians and Christian churches could be and are. It's almost in our DNA to believe that God loves us best, if not exclusively. Peter loved to tell a story about it—in fact told it at every opportunity.

> A Guided Tour of Heaven: The guide takes a visitor through a splendid palace, each room filled with merrymakers. The visitor sees the Baptists in one room dancing, which was forbidden on earth; the Methodists in another room drinking; the Presbyterians in a large space enjoying unaccustomed chaos; and the Roman Catholics in another large space enjoying guilt without sex. As they turn a corner and approach yet another large room, the guide says, "We must be quiet now: these are the Episcopalians and they think they're the only ones here." Peter, who was an American Baptist but talked and acted like a high-church Anglican, always assured people who heard this old joke that they were perfectly free to substitute any denomination they wanted because, as he said, "Some people cannot imagine anyone else in their eternity: they imagine heaven as exclusive as their own church, filled with remarkably similar people" (p. 196).

The underlying issue, of course, the issue underlying Jesus' mandate that everyone deserves to be treated with respect and kindness, that there is a kind of ontological equality in God's eyes—the underlying issue is, does God's love for every one of his children have eternal implications? Are we Christians the only ones who get in? What about nonbelievers? What about Jews? What about people of other faiths? What about Muslims?

Gomes observed that evangelical Christian friends of his were horrified at the thought that there might be non-Christians in heaven. Rob Bell, a popular pastor and leader in the Emergent Church movement and, theologically, an evangelical, has just stirred up a hornet's nest in the

evangelical community by suggesting in his book *Love Wins* that Gandhi, for instance, must be in heaven.

“Can serious Christians seriously believe that they are the only ones upon whom God has placed his blessing?” Peter Gomes asked, “If Jesus Christ is the center of the biblical witness and the one in whom all that we know about God is to be found, how do we reconcile his expansive and inclusive behavior as recorded in scriptures with what has so often been the constricted and exclusive practice of the church?”

Peter died recently, and as I thought about him last week and, as a way of honoring him, looked through his books that have a prominent place on my shelves, I was grateful to come upon this: “When I think of the future, when I think of heaven, when I think of the end of the age as we know it, I think of the loving, gracious God in whose hands it all rests, and I am glad, even delighted, that this God is far more generous than many of his most ardent worshipers and preachers” (p. 158).

Christians and Muslims constitute together the majority of the world’s population. And there is nothing more important than that Christians and Muslims understand one another and understand what we believe and do not believe about God.

Miroslav Volf, Professor of Theology at Yale, author of the important book *Exclusion and Embrace*, out of his experience as a soldier in the tragic war between Croatian Catholics, Serbian Orthodox, and Bosnian Muslims, has written a new and very important book: *Allah: A Christian Response*. “Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?” he asks and suggests that if we could agree that the answer is yes, of course, “domestic and international clashes could be preempted or mitigated.” Volf points out something we ought never forget: that Allah is the Arabic word for God; that Arabic Christians, Christian brothers and sisters in Jordan and Syria and Palestine, have always prayed to Allah, just as their Muslim neighbors have prayed.

Something beautiful happened in Egypt recently that never made it on national news. Egypt is 10 percent Christian. The Coptic Christian Church is one of the oldest in the world. You may remember that on New Year’s Eve a bomb exploded outside a prominent Coptic church in Alexandria. Twenty-three people were killed and 90 seriously wounded. The attack was meant to spark sectarian tension, but instead a remarkable thing happened—a movement throughout Egypt in which Muslims expressed sorrow and thousands showed up to attend Coptic Christmas services with Christian neighbors. An American Lutheran pastor working in Egypt told the *Christian Century* that “at church after church Muslims formed human chains of protection around Christian buildings so Christian brothers and

sisters could celebrate Christmas. Millions of Egyptians replaced their Facebook profile photos with the image of the cross and crescent. Bumper stickers showed up all over Egypt with the cross inside the crescent and the words, 'We Are All Egyptians.'"

The religious news is not all bad, not at all.

Robert Putnam has written a new book with David Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. Based on the findings of a national survey of religious attitudes, Putnam confirmed that religion still divides us but a good thing is happening. We are becoming more tolerant of one another. To the horror of some religious leaders, pastors, professors, bishops—only 10 percent of us believe that only our religion is true. Fully 80 percent believe that there is truth in other religions. Fully 54 percent of Evangelicals say non-Christians can go to heaven.

The reason, Putnam says, is the Aunt Susan Principle:

> We all have an Aunt Susan in our lives, the sort of person who epitomizes what it means to be a saint, but whose religious background is different from our own. Maybe you are Jewish; she is Methodist. Maybe you are Roman Catholic; Aunt Susan is not religious. But whatever her religion (or lack thereof) you know that Aunt Susan is destined for heaven. And if she is going to heaven, what does that say about other people who share her religion or lack of religion? (p. 526).

I could get in trouble with the self-appointed guardians of orthodoxy, but I no longer can believe that God's agenda is for everyone in the world to be what I am, that our purpose is to defeat and eliminate other religions by killing their adherents—which we have tried and failed—or by out-arguing them and converting them to our religion. I could get in trouble, but I only have a few months left so it doesn't matter, but what I deeply believe God's agenda is, is for us to love the world as God loves the world and to love our neighbors as Jesus told us to love and to respect and serve every other human being because he or she is as beloved of God as we are, to treat everyone as we wish to be treated and to reach out and take the hand of the other and ask the only really important question: how can we better love this world God has given us?

And how can you and I live this one and only life God has given us, fully and faithfully, in the way God wants us to live?

Before he sent them back into the world, into the messy complexity of their communities and the life of their nation, back to their synagogues and jobs, back to their families, to live as his men and women, his faithful people, he spoke one final charge and promise: "Everyone who hears these words of

mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on a rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.”

That is the promise, the challenge, and the invitation: to follow him, to hear his gracious words, and to act on them, to do them; to invite him into our heart of hearts and to promise to be his faithful man, woman all the days of our lives.

Amen.